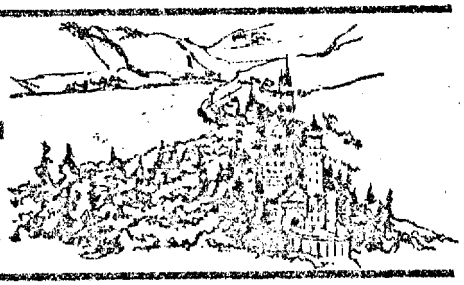
FROM THE CONTINENT



■ When an important story of international significance becomes common knowledge to the Continent, is openly discussed in European journals, and is not mentioned at all in America, one wonders why. Two anti-Gaullist weeklies, *Minute* and *Aux Ecoutes*, recently broke such a story in Paris. With no comment from your correspondent, here are the bare outlines of the bizarre tale as exposed by the two papers mentioned.

On the afternoon of Friday, May 27, 1966, six French *Mystere IV* pursuit planes, for no apparent reason, crashed near Seville, in Spain. Their pilots barely had time to release their ejectable seats and parachute to safety. What were the six *Mysteres* doing in Spain? Paris explained that it was a routine training flight on which fog had closed in and, unable to find the San Pablo airport in Seville, the pilots were forced to parachute when they ran out of fuel.

Frenchmen interested in embarrassing the de Gaulle Government quickly learned that visibility was excellent in the Seville area on May twenty-seventh. At this point their sole interest lay in making political hay out of the loss of three-billion francs worth of airplanes. As bits of the *Mystere* puzzle fell into place, however, it became evident that something considerably more important than a routine training flight had been afoot.

Faced with the irrefutable weather report from Spain, French authorities changed their story: "A series of consecutive errors made by the squadron leader had led to the accident. The Alberca radar had been confused with that of San Pablo, and the Chanca river had been mistaken for the Guadalquivir." When this line was released, indignation rocked France. Captain Guers, the squadron leader, was one of the best in the French Airforce, and three of his team-mates, Captain Olivier, Lieutenant Perenne, and Master-Sergeant Maistre, were also experienced men. That all four of them could have made the same mistake was impossible. Furthermore, how could one explain the fact that radio communications from all six planes went out simultaneously, before the crash?

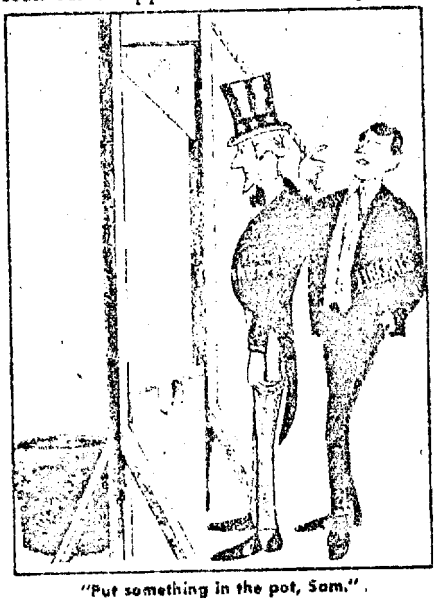
Painstakingly, the de Gaulle opposition examined every hypothesis. Charges that the pilots had wasted their fuel buzzing Spanish towns at low altitude were categorically denied. A few well-intentioned commentators advanced the theory that the radio compasses in use were old and defective. Monsieur Messmer, the Minister of Defense, raised a wall of silence and let critics think anything they wished.

There the matter rested until, out of Madrid, in bits and pieces, came the Spanish explanation of the affair. That it was the Spanish Left that leaked the details, and that the French Communist Party saw fit to let Monsieur Gaston Defferre, the Socialist Mayor of Marseilles, use the fiasco against the de Gaulle Government, is a tribute to the efficacy of Communist intelligence and strategy rather than any reason to doubt

the report.

Briefly, here is the story confronting the silent Monsieur Messmer, which may or may never be verified: The six *Mystere IV*'s were not on an ordinary training flight, but on a secret mission. Members of the de Gaulle team, and probably "The Guide" himself, were still incensed by American flights over the Pierrelatte atomic center in France some months ago. Accordingly, one of the best groups in the French Airforce was ordered to approach the American bases of Rota and Moron, near Seville, at low altitude, escaping radar detection if possible. It was not a spy mission, such as American planes have made over Cuba, Red China, and Russia. The object of the flight was political: To prove to Madrid that American bases were no guarantee against enemy attack; on the contrary, that Spain, despite such bases, was at the mercy of low-flying atomic raiders able to escape radar detection and penetrate American defenses at will.

The formation crossed Spain at 25,000 feet. As it approached Seville, Spanish



"Put something in the pot, Sam."

control centers noted that it descended to 1,800 feet. Since visibility was good, traffic to and from San Pablo was not disrupted. The six *Mysteres* appeared to be having no difficulty as they proceeded on a direct line toward the Rota base, in formation. When the American radar system picked them up they were asked to identify themselves. Being under orders from Paris not to reply to any demand for identification, they veered off and attempted another approach at 900 feet. Again they were challenged and again they refused to reply.

On the third approach, according to the story out of Spain, the American bases assumed they were a flight of hostile aircraft and used a secret weapon which had the effect of jamming all radio circuits and electric controls. It was at this point that the six *Mysteres* went into steep dives from which their pilots barely had time to release their ejectable seats. One plane fell several hundred feet offshore. The others crashed in a half-circle around the American base.

Picked up where they fell, the pilots were already being questioned by Spanish and American officers when Paris ordered French Consul Aubin de Blanpre, in Seville, to "prevent by any means the interrogation of the pilots." It was de Blanpre who had to admit first that the fog story did not hold together and then that the crashes were unexplainable. Meanwhile, France's Ambassador to Spain, Robert de Boisesson, his three military attaches, and a colonel dispatched by the Defense Ministry in Paris were kept waiting twenty-four hours before the six pilots were turned over to them.

By that time one pilot had cracked. Accused of risking the lives of a large number of people by crashing his plane 750 feet from a group of dwellings, he exclaimed, "There was nothing I could do! Suddenly my instruments went dead and I lost all control. My plane

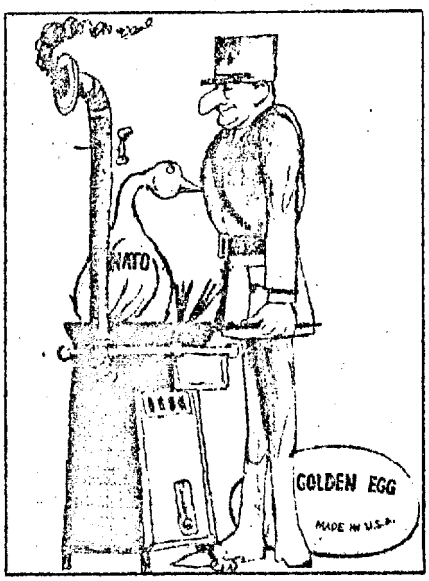
began to fall like a stone! The same thing happened to my team-mates at the same time!"

The Spaniards had never believed the story that the planes were out of fuel, since the refueling plane that accompanied them had landed safely at the Seville airport at 2:42 p.m., just a few minutes before the crash. It was when Americans from the Rota base started collecting every available part of the wrecked *Mysteres* that talk of an American "secret ray" began intriguing the ever-watchful Spanish Left, beset with queries for information from Communist nerve centers in Brussels and Paris.

Pressed for statements, the American commander at Rota declared:

> *This affair concerns us primarily. The French fighters were not approaching San Pablo. They were coming in toward Rota. We first picked them up in combat formation at 2,600 feet and asked their identity. Instead of replying they changed course and came back at 950 feet. They were given two more requests to identify themselves and, having failed to do so ten seconds from the base, we took the measures that were necessary.*

At this point, another question presents itself, a question that still remains unanswered: If de Gaulle intended to show the Spaniards that American air bases on Spanish soil are no protection against sneak attack, why didn't he use new *Mirage IV*s, the latest weapon in the French Airforce, instead of the already obsolete *Mysteres*? The assumption of the anti-Gaullists appears to be the only logical one: that the mission was not only for the purpose of frightening the Spaniards but also to test the efficacy of the secret American weapon. For this purpose the outmoded *Mysteres* were expendable. There was no point in risking the loss of six new *Mirage IV*'s or exposing the vulnerability of the last word in the equipment of the French Airforce.



And he's famous for his red-eyed gravy.

Once Frenchmen and Spaniards had accepted this reasoning, a whole new series of hypotheses presented themselves. Was de Gaulle testing Rota's defenses to satisfy his curiosity? Or was his move to embarrass the Americans and frighten Spain a part of a carefully prepared plan to give himself added prestige before his trip to Moscow? Had Moscow hinted that information on America's "secret ray" defenses would be a welcome gift if their visitor contemplated bringing one? More important, was the risking of six pursuit planes, while verifying the existence and efficacy of America's top secret air defenses, part of a preliminary appraisal that may soon determine both Russian and French policy in Vietnam?

Whatever the explanation, the political consequences of the Rota affair are expected to go further than the official silence on the affair would seem to indicate.—Hilaire du Berrier from The Continent